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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted by seven graduate students to investigate their experiences in the Center for Excellence in Education doctoral program in Educational Leadership at Northern Arizona University. The purpose of the study was to provide the graduate students with experience in conducting qualitative research. Aspects of the doctoral program studied included: acceptance into the doctoral program, statistic course requirements, dissertation and comprehensive exams, program mechanics, and other emergent factors. For each aspect studied, perceived strengths, perceived weaknesses, and recommendations for improvement were determined. Data were collected during two focus group sessions of approximately 1 hour duration. The group used a grounded theory approach to qualitative research, based on the criteria of fit, understanding, generality, and control. Rather than present a group conclusion, each member of the study group prepared a short, subjective statement summarizing the essence of their experience as a participant in the project. Sixteen recommendations for program improvements were generated. (JDD)

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ED 365 639

FOCUS GROUP STUDY

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DOCTORAL STUDENTS' EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS OF THE GRADUATE PROGRAM IN EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP IN THE CENTER FOR EXCELLENCE IN EDUCATION AT NORTHERN ARIZONA UNIVERSITY

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to give members of the group experience in conducting qualitative research. It was felt that an exercise conducting research would be more useful to the participants than listening to lectures about research.

Identification of the Problem Statement

This study is to investigate graduate students' experiences in the Center for Excellence in Education (CEE) doctoral program in Educational Leadership (EDL), at Northern Arizona University. We called our group, out of several in the class, the "Flashpots." Specifically, this study will investigate students' experiences in the following aspects of the doctoral program:

I. Acceptance into doctoral program
   - A. Length of time
   - B. Consulting and advisement on the program of studies
   - C. Options for program of studies
   - D. Access to advisors

II. Statistic course requirements
   - A. Qualitative
   - B. Quantitative

III. Dissertation and comprehensive exams

A. Requirements

B. Preparation

IV. Program Mechanics

A. On Campus

B. Off Campus

V. Other Emergent Factors

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of a study are restrictions that have been identified from the methodology used. Limitations occur when the methodology is not ideal to the particular situation. Problems develop when the processes, procedures, or populations are not representative of the ideal situation creating questions concerning the external and internal validity of the project.

The limitations in this study included the absence of a pilot study. Due to the time constraints of the course, the Flashpots were unable to test a pilot study for this project. This prevented the group from testing the internal and external validity of the study.

The second limitation in the study was the association of the focus group participants. The focus group simulation participants were previously introduced prior to the focus group simulation, and had knowledge of the simulation prior to the experience. This can be looked upon as positive or negative. It was positive in the respect that the group members were already familiar with one another. They were comfortable being asked the questions by the members of the group and were able to give open and honest responses. However, it may be

considered negative because the participants already had preconceived ideas about what was to be asked.

The delimitations of this study were those factors that restricted the scope of the study. The delimitations of the study were identified as those factors in which participants of the focus group were identified. The participants of the focus group were identified as doctoral students admitted into the Educational Leadership program in the Center for Excellence in Education at Northern Arizona University. Therefore, the results of this study may only be generalized to students in the existing program.

Significance of the Research

This research project will produce better trained researchers. It will provide an experiential learning opportunity for its participants. Additionally, the results obtained from the study can be utilized to improve the Educational Leadership program in the Center for Excellence in Education.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

A review of relevant literature was conducted prior to and during the course of this study. The purpose of this review was to utilize background reading to provide the project with the resources enumerated by Strauss and Corbin (1990):

1. To stimulate theoretical sensitivity.
2. To provide secondary sources of data.
3. To stimulate questions.
4. To direct theoretical sampling.
5. To provide supplementary validation.

In addition to a short survey of the literature in qualitative research, particularly in the area of focus group driven research, the study was derived as a partial replication of a previous project conducted by Packard and Dereshiwsky (1990) at the same site.

Validity in qualitative research, the degree to which qualitative procedures really measure what they propose to measure, has been the topic of a certain degree of debate in the literature. The focus group method utilized in this study can be the subject of most of the criticisms and kudos made with regard to validity considerations in qualitative methods in general. Beginning with

Cambell and Stanley's work in 1963 (Schofield, 1989), the debate over external validity in qualitative research has focused on the concept of generalizability: the discontent with perceived weaknesses in many quantitative techniques. Cook and Campbell (1979) subdivide the validity issue into internal and external validities, each dependent upon the approach to cause and effect taken by the study and its critics. Further, they recognize considerations of construct validity and statistical conclusion validity, all of which are tied to *a priori* assumptions regarding cause and effect. Since the issues of which validities are violated, exactly when and why this occurs, and why they may vary so much from study to study, Krueger recommends that researchers, critics and consumers rely primarily on the face, predictive and convergent validity of the stud. In other words, does the study appear sensible? If so, are the study's conclusions useful in predicting behaviors and in agreement with other useful works in the area?

Because of the difficulty in establishing exact equivalences across qualitative studies, some theoreticians (Guba & Lincoln, 1981: cited in Schofield) have proposed the adoption of a new term, *fittingness*, to describe approximate equivalence between research situations. In the study of educational situations, Schofield (1989) proposes that generalizability may apply to 1) the study of what is, 2) the study of what may be, and 3) the study of what could be. Regarding approaches to the study of what is, the chief concern of the current paper, Schofield recommends 1) studying the typical, and 2) performing multisite studies. Krueger (1988) observes that the opportunities for error attendant upon over generalization are readily apparent in focus group driven research. In important or crucial situations, he recommends that multimethod approaches, (including focus groups), will increase the chances of accurate prediction.

The current project relies upon a group developed protocol. Guidance in this area is supplied by "Case Study Research: Design and Methods," (Yin, 1989).

Prior to protocol development, Yin recommends that research team members clarify why the study is being done, what evidence is being sought, and what variations or contradictions in the evidence might be expected. Protocols based upon these considerations would then be developed as a team effort. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) advise researchers to develop questions which fit the topic, illuminate the phenomenon under investigation, and be anchored in the cultural reality of the informants' lives. In addition, during the pilot (and subsequent) stages of the enquiry, Glesne and Peshkin recommend that careful consideration be given to critiques of the protocol by colleagues, informants, and advisors.

Morgan (1988) observes that the use of focus groups has historically been common in marketing, but is relatively new to social science research. He observes that the focus group method is desirable for obtaining concentrated data from a series of interactions by group participants. This type of collection, particularly useful in obtaining information regarding attitudes and cognitions, provides the kind of "thick" descriptions recommended by Schofield (1988) as the major benefit of qualitative approaches.

A phenomenon attendant upon focus group driven research is that group interactions replace researcher control (Morgan, 1988). The result, however, is a two sided coin; the information derived from focus groups is the result of the interactions of the participants and is: 1) not necessarily focused on the researcher's concerns and 2) not necessarily the same information which the researcher might have obtained by interaction with each focus group member individually.

"Coding is a progressive process of sorting and defining and defining and sorting those scraps of collected data ... that are applicable to our research purpose" (Glesne & Peshkin, p. 133). The coding of focus group generated data is a process of analysis and synthesis consisting of "examining, categorizing,

tabulating, or otherwise recombining the evidence to address the initial propositions of a study" (Yin, 1984, p. 99). Given any set of data, there are likely to be numerous ways to code it. The choice of problem statement, identification of subproblems and selection of study participants, as well as known and unknown biases and presuppositions on the researcher's part, are likely to have direct and indirect impacts on the choice of a coding system. In order to maintain a claim to reasonable objectivity and systemic integrity, Krueger (1988) recommends that certain rules be followed while analyzing focus group data: 1) pay attention to individual words and tag phrases, 2) take context into account, 3) note internal consistency and inconsistency, particularly shifts in position, 4) distinguish specific, experience-based responses from vague and impersonal responses, 5) isolate the major ideas in the discourse, (avoid not seeing the forest because of the trees), and 6) maintain a sense of the purpose, type, and scope of the final report.

Miles and Huberman (1984) discuss twelve methods for deriving meaningful conclusions from qualitative data. They include: counting, seeing plausibility, clustering, making metaphors, differentiation, factoring, detecting intervening variables, and making theoretical and conceptual coherence. Although the process of drawing conclusions traditionally occurs near the end of a study, in reality a great deal of the researcher's anticipated decisions can be inferred from the earliest stages of conceptualizing and planning the project. The holistic fallacy, elite bias and the process of going native (Miles & Huberman, 1984) may intervene to skew results at any stage of the process but are particularly prone to affect the coding, analysis and conclusion making process. Careful selection of sites and participants as well as thorough review of the literature and care in the planning stages of the project (Yin, 1984; Krueger, 1988; Schofield, 1989) should be helpful in reducing the chance of false conclusions in the final report.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

The Problem Statement

This study is to investigate graduate students' experiences in the CEE doctoral program in Educational Leadership. Specifically, this study will investigate students' experiences in the following areas of the doctoral program:

I. Acceptance into doctoral program
   - A. Length of time
   - B. Consulting and advisement on the program of studies
   - C. Options for program of studies
   - D. Access to advisors

II. Statistic course requirements
   - A. Qualitative
   - B. Quantitative

III. Dissertation and comprehensive exams
   - A. Requirements
   - B. Preparation

IV. Program Mechanics
   - A. On Campus
   - B. Off Campus

V. Other Emergent Factors

Population and Sample

The participants for this focus group consisted of seven part-time students pursuing doctoral degrees in Educational Leadership at the Center for Excellence in Education at Northern Arizona University. All participants, at the time of the study, were members of EDR 735 Qualitative Research, Summer Session II, 1993. See the table on page 12 for a demographic description.

The participants were officially accepted into the program beginning from Spring 1989 through Spring 1993. The length of time from earning a prior degree ranged from one to twenty-five years. Their educational background included: education, speech pathology, higher education, social work, and medicine. Four members were part-time students who completed a significant part of their program at locations such as Phoenix, Tuscon, and Pt. Loma. The remaining three members were completing their studies on campus in Flagstaff.

All participants were employed at the time of the study. Five were employed in classified position, one in an unclassified position, and one in an administrative position. The range of time in their position at the time of the study was from two to thirteen years.

Methods of Qualitative Data Collection

The method of data coding and collection was derived from procedures proposed by Miles and Huberman (1984) The members took turns as questioners and interviewees. A tape recorder was utilized to ensure accurate records of the proceedings. One member provided transcription services and other members assisted in script taking.

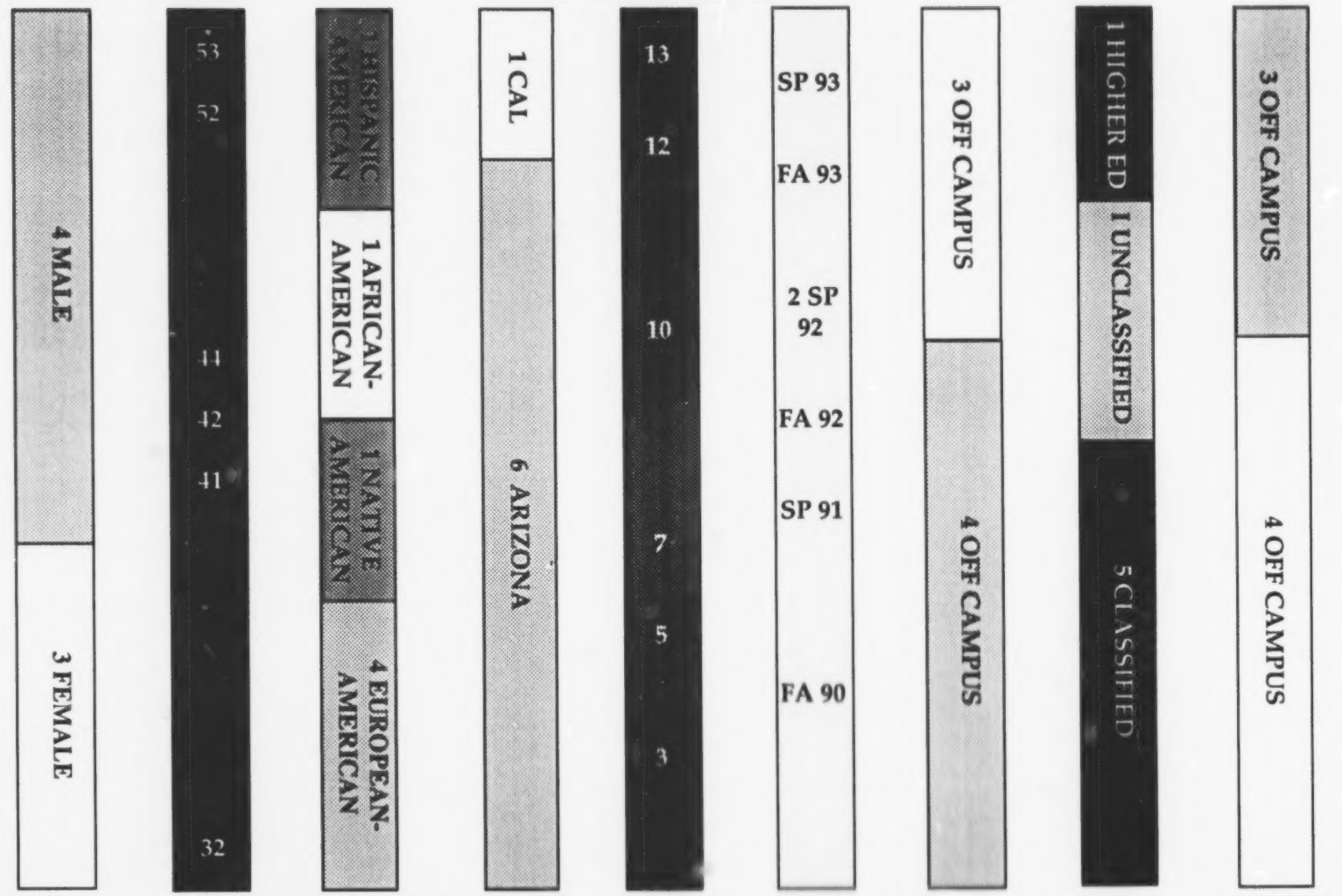
Two focus group sessions of approximately one hour duration occurred on July 21 and 22, 1993. After these sessions, the audio recordings were transcribed, the data coded, and the results tabulated in the matrices found later in this chapter.

Focus Group Questions and Probes

The following is the list of questions that were utilized in the focus groups in order to obtain the data for our study.

1. Tell us about the mechanics of your acceptance into the program
   - in terms of the process
   - in terms of advisement on your program of study
   - in terms of options and alternatives
   - in terms of access to advisors.
2. The statistic courses appear to raise concerns for many students. What is your response to the requirements?
   - qualitative versus quantitative
   - in terms of usefulness to you.
3. Comprehensive examinations raise concerns for many students. What is your reaction to them?
   - in knowing what they are
   - in terms of preparing yourself to take them
   - in terms of your anxiety level about taking them.
4. Doing a dissertation raises concerns for many students. What is your reaction to the dissertation?
   - in terms of knowing what to do
   - in terms of getting assistance from your advisor
   - in terms of it meeting the program's needs or your needs.
5. How have you experienced this program as an on campus or off campus student? How have you experienced this program as a part-time or full-time student?
   - in terms of course offerings
   - in terms of access to your advisor
   - in terms of access to research literature
   - in terms of meeting the residency requirements.

DEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE



CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS

Grounded Theory

The Flashpots used a grounded theory approach to qualitative research in their study of CEE doctoral students in Educational Leadership. This method "uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived grounded theory about a phenomenon" (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The data collected from the focus group simulation consisted, theoretically, of the reality of the subjects in the study. The relationships between the focus group simulation participants and the study (i.e. experiences in the doctoral program) were generated and tested within the focus group simulation, allowing theory to be discovered.

The focus groups' grounded theory approach was based on the following criteria as stated by Strauss and Corbin: 1) fit, 2) understanding, 3) generality, and 4) control (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The purpose of the qualitative study completed by the Flashpots was to investigate students in the CEE doctoral program in Educational Leadership. Their experiences in the program in specific areas listed, determined the strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations for improvement for future doctoral students in the program.

A focus group consisting of existing doctoral students investigated these areas of concern. Demographics were obtained from the focus group members. Data collected from the demographic survey displayed a well-balance of students in terms of age, ethnicity, location, and stage in their program. By interviewing these students already in the doctoral program, the Flashpots were able to substantiate our data and make a "fit" between the everyday reality of the substantive area and the carefully induced diverse data (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

The focus group in this study represented real students in the Educational Leadership doctoral program. Therefore, this well-constructed grounded theory represented reality and will make sense to not only the subjects in the study, but other students, faculty, staff, and administrators in the program.

The data collected was broad-based and conceptual allowing the theory to be generalized to other students within the program. The focus group questions and probes consisted of those which may be used for other students in the CEE doctoral program in Educational Leadership, permitting the generalization of theory.

Finally, the hypotheses stated in the study proposed relationships among the concepts which are systematically derived from the actual data related to the events (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). The concepts of the doctoral program were stated in terms of questions and probes addressed in the focus group. As previously stated, concepts including demographic information about the subjects assured the balance of age, ethnicity, location, and level of progress in the doctoral program. This allowed the theory to provide control with regard to action toward the events of the study.

Question #1: Narrative

Acceptance Into Program: Perceived Strengths

Five of the seven focus group members stated that the process of being accepted into the doctoral program went rather smoothly once they received the information. As one participant stated, "The interview committee came to Point Loma to hold interviews. The people at Point Loma were also very helpful with putting the portfolio together."

A number of respondents commented on the strengths of the advisement process in the program. One participant noted that she was advised by a professor that the doctoral program was the "next step to go" after her master's program. Another had been advised to apply for the program at NAU because it was viewed as one of the top programs in the country. One participant mentioned that the master's program in EDL allowed ease into the doctoral program in EDL. In one instance, a participant had taken EDL 600 Leadership Skills in the master's program. A portfolio assignment was made in that particular course and she was advised to continue building on the portfolio, which would assist in the preparation for the doctoral portfolio. Several stated that they were sent a packet upon request of admissions information which included 2 to 3 pages of procedures for application, and what should be included in the portfolio. This allowed the application process to go rather smoothly.

Acceptance Into Program: Perceived Weaknesses

Regarding the process of being accepted into the program, a few members stated that they did not receive any information or instructions on the application process or the portfolio, unlike other members of the group. This demonstrated some inconsistencies in the application process. One particular member discussed the fact that he lost 9 months in the application process because he was

not given information about his advisor who was no longer at the university. He found out that his advisor was involved in a textbook scam by reading it in the newspaper. No one told the student this when he called. "I had a week and a half to put together a second portfolio because there were some problems with the person that was appointed as my advisor."

It was discussed that there is some lack of clarity and possible redundancy in terms of the CEE vs. Graduate College application requirements and processes. The packet of information some students received on the application process led them to believe that official transcripts need to be included in the portfolio as well as sent to the graduate college with their application.

One participant felt that there were some inconsistencies in the portfolio evaluation point system. As stated by one member, ". . . one professor gave me zero points for creativity. In my life I have been a graphic artist and have been a musician all my life, and I felt that was totally inappropriate as far as giving me no points in creativity."

In regards to the actual interview procedure, several participants stated that they drove several hours to attend a 20 minute interview. One person stated that there were only 2 professors in the interview.

In terms of advisement into the program, a few members perceived the process as needing improvement. Comments were made that they received no advisement on the application process or portfolio, and in one case, an advisor in the master's program gave one particular individual incorrect information about the process. Other members had to search for information about the program, which was a problem.

Unlike one member in the group, the others stated that they did not have any courses in the master's program or anything that assisted in the preparation of the portfolio. They were given a list of items to include, but information was

not available on the contents or format of the portfolio.

When discussing access to advisors in the program, participants felt that access was difficult mainly because there were too many (200) students in the doctoral program. It is too difficult to accommodate that many students in the program. It was a concern that advisor are not assigned to students until after they are accepted into the program, and in some instances off-campus, advisors are not available at all. Another primary concern was the fact that no one in the Center has an up-to-date data-base on all the students that show where they are in their program. A lot of information is missing, not available, or is not current.

Acceptance Into Program: Recommendations for Improvement

The group participants made clear recommendations for improvement of the CEE/NAU doctoral program in Educational Leadership. First, consistency in the application process needs to be addressed. All students should receive a uniform packet of what the requirements are to get into the program. The packet should include information regarding the portfolio items. Participants felt that follow-up information about the application process (i.e. step-by-step feedback) should be provided. It was also suggested that clarification needs to be made concerning the CEE and Graduate College application requirements and processes to reduce the perceived redundancy.

The participants who are located off-campus felt that interviews for some of the off-campus students should be held in a more centrally located area such as Phoenix. This would eliminate the long and tiring drives for 20 minute interviews.

Advisement into the program was also a key focal point. The participants felt that adequate advisement on the application process and portfolio should be available and accessible to everyone applying to the program. Advisors should

be available off-campus as well, to assist the off-campus students that do not have the benefits of being on-campus to access needed information. It was also suggested that courses in the master's program should assist in the process as they did for one participant.

EDL DOCTORAL PROGRAM EXPERIENCES MATRIX
Question #1a

TOPIC	EXPERIENCES	SPECIFICS	PERCEIVED STRENGTHS	PERCEIVED WEAKNESSES	RECOMMENDA-TIONS
Acceptance into program	Process	Time Portfolio Application Interview	Portfolio and application process went smoothly for some members Interview committee came to Point Loma	Several hour drive for short interview Only 2 professors at interview Inconsistencies in point system of portfolio evaluation Lack of instructions for portfolio Lost 9 months due to advisor leaving - department failed to notify Redundancy and lack of clarity regarding CEE and Graduate college requirements	Hold interviews at off-campus locations Provide a uniform packet of program requirements to all students Make application process consistent Provide step by step feedback at all points of application process Clarify requirements and applications processes of CEE and Graduate College

EDL DOCTORAL PROGRAM EXPERIENCES MATRIX
Question #1b

TOPIC	EXPERIENCES	SPECIFICS	PERCEIVED STRENGTHS	PERCEIVED WEAKNESSES	RECOMMENDA-TIONS
Acceptance into program (cont.)	Consulting and advisement	Application information Portfolio Program of Studies	Master's in EDL allowed easy transition into Ed.D. Informative 2-3 pages of instructions for portfolio provided EDL 600 portfolio assignment prepared for Ed.D. application CEE/NAU EDL Ed.D. perceived as one of top ten in country	No advisement on application or portfolio process Lack of preparation for portfolio Information difficult to obtain regarding program Advisor gave incorrect information regarding program	Provide adequate advisement and assistance on the application and portfolio process Standardize packet information sent to students and advisors

EDL DOCTORAL PROGRAM EXPERIENCES MATRIX
Question #1c

TOPIC	EXPERIENCES	SPECIFICS	PERCEIVED STRENGTHS	PERCEIVED WEAKNESSES	RECOMMENDA-TIONS
Acceptance into program	Access to advisors	On campus Off campus Prior to admission	Point Loma advisors very helpful	High number of students decreases accessibility to advisors Advisors frequently not available off campus No advisement available until after acceptance Lack of accurate and up-to-date database detailing student's standing on admission process	Provide pre-advisement on portfolio and admission processes Provide master courses or seminars to assist in admissions process Increase accessibility and standardize information about programs and processes

Question #2: Narrative

Qualitative Statistics: Specifics

Two of the positive responses were aimed at exactly that; the qualitative statistics courses were positive experiences. Another positive response indicated that the respondent liked their professors. The final comment found under qualitative/specifics was that the respondent now had the tools to do a qualitative investigation in an area that had previously been done quantitatively.

Qualitative Statistics: Perceived Strengths

Qualitative statistics is much more relevant to the EDL dissertation according to two focus group members. Two others indicated that the applicability to their area of interest is just incredible. Another remarked that qualitative is very nicely related to quantitative statistics. One group member indicated that the ability to interrelate the two areas was an asset (multimethodolgy).

Qualitative Statistics: Perceived Weaknesses

There were no comments on any perceived weaknesses regarding qualitative statistics in the EDL doctoral program.

Qualitative Statistics: Recommendations For Improvement

The entire focus group agreed that there should be more emphasis on qualitative statistics in the EDL doctoral program because it is so much more relevant to the type of research that is done in Educational Leadership. The one suggestion was that qualitative statistics should be emphasized in the area of educational research. Its relevance to the type of research that is done in education is seemingly inveighed.

Quantitative Statistics: Specifics

There were two people in the focus group that had positive experiences with statistics courses. Another respondent liked their quantitative professors. One of the members remarked about having statistics anxiety and there didn't seem to be much they could do about it other than bite the bullet and muddle through the course to obtain a grade of C.

One individual commented that taking the quantitative courses on the computer with the professor who wrote the book was a very positive experience. As a carry over, he/she is extremely happy with the professors he/she now has for qualitative statistics. Finally, two group members agreed that taking quantitative statistics without computers should be required. They both felt that everyone ought to "sweat bullets" just to get the feel of quantitative statistics.

Quantitative Statistics: Perceived Strengths

There was general agreement that the introductory quantitative statistics course was a good foundation for future course work. Two members stated that they thought it was relevant to the doctoral program course of studies.

Quantitative Statistics: Perceived Weaknesses

One respondent related a story of how the quantitative instructor seemed to go out of his way to make things as difficult as possible. The story goes on that the professor would come in to class and begin to write "stuff" on one end of the chalk board and go around the room until all of the chalk boards were full of problems and equations. The professor would explain very little and then erase it all and start again.

Another group member related how his statistics anxiety came to bear when taking the quantitative introduction course in a summer session course.

Three or more chapters were covered in one day which overwhelmed the student. Furthermore, at the time of the second of three exams the student had the flu, did poorly on the exam, and subsequently lost his 4.0 GPA because of the C he received for the class.

One respondent expressed concern that quantitative statistics was difficult to apply to real-life situations. On the other hand, another person remarked as to the deftness with which he could apply quantitative measures to his current project.

Quantitative Statistics: Recommendations For Improvement

There was general consensus that quantitative statistics courses should not be taken during summer session classes, especially if one has statistics anxiety. The interference from anxiety and/or illness could have a deleterious effect on the student's class performance.

Two focus group members indicated that quantitative statistics should not be taken with the aid of computers. Finally, one group member felt that taking quantitative statistics using a computer program was perfectly acceptable, and should be left to one's own personal choice.

EDL DOCTORAL PROGRAM EXPERIENCES MATRIX
Question #2

TOPIC	EXPERIENCES	SPECIFICS	PERCEIVED STRENGTHS	PERCEIVED WEAKNESSES	RECOMMENDA-TIONS
Statistics Course Requirements	Qualitative	2 students had positive experiences Research was adapted from previous quantitative methods	Good professors Highly relevant for dissertation Relates well to quantitative research Integrated well in multimethods	Vague Not helpful for comprehensive exams	Increase number of course offerings in Qualitative design i.e. Focus Group, Interviewing, Case studies and Ethnography
	Quantitative	1 student had negative experience with statistics in summer session 2 students had positive experiences	Good professors Useful for evaluating and critiquing research articles Relevant	Too intense for summer session for many students High-level of anxiety induced with no remediation available Difficult to apply to dissertation	Increase use of computers in statistics courses

Question #3: Narrative

Comprehensive Examination: Perceived Strengths

The most positive factor regarding the exams that most members mentioned was the formation of study groups. These study groups help ease the anxiety created by the exams. Several members mentioned that many of the professors are willing to provide study guides such as the ones on comparative education written by Dr. M. and the videotape by Dr. D.

The take home portions of the exams (i.e. article critique and review of literature), were thought to be positive aspect of the exams. Many members thought these portions of the exams better tested the student's true abilities. Additionally, some members thought the experience of writing the 20-25 page paper would help considerably in the completion of their dissertation.

Comprehensive Examination: Perceived Weaknesses

All members had negative comments on the current way comprehensive examinations are given. Most felt that the time constraints were not related to tasks experienced in the real world. Many expressed the need to cram for the exams rather than develop a comprehensive understanding of the materials..."you just sit there and you regurgitate."

All members felt that there was too much of a mystique surrounding the exams. One member expressed her frustration with the exams as the "Big Secret." Another complained about the lack of information provided regarding the exams.

Comprehensive Examinations: Recommendations for Improvements

It was suggested that a handbook be provided with a step-by-step guide

of what to study and how to prepare for the comprehensive exams. A checklist should be included so that students know where they stand regarding the exam. Many members thought the timed portions of the comprehensive examination should be eliminated and be replaced with take home exercises. This would allow the students to demonstrate their true comprehension of the materials.

EDL DOCTORAL PROGRAM EXPERIENCES MATRIX
Question #3

TOPIC	EXPERIENCES	SPECIFICS	PERCEIVED STRENGTHS	PERCEIVED WEAKNESSES	RECOMMENDA-TIONS
Comprehensive Examinations	Requirements Preparation	Most students expressed high anxiety Most students felt too little informations was made available Many students felt they were inadequately prepared Some students questioned the need and/or validity of the comps	Informal study groups Helpfulness of certain professors to provide information regarding the comps The research portion of comps as a "take home" exercise	Secretiveness Unnecessary anxiety created Lack of knowing what classes to take to prepare for comps and when to schedule comps Lack of written materials on comps Lack of validity tests recall instead of comprehension Inappropriate time limit for writing Doesn't relate to writing in real world	Improve communication with students regarding comps i.e., a step-by-step handbook Create a database and update it each semester to indicate student's progress toward comps, residency, and other graduation requirements Send student a printout each semester Change all of comps to "take home" exercise

Question 4: Narrative

Dissertation: Perceived Strengths

The focus group's participants' responses to the questions on the dissertation were mostly positive. Negative responses and recommendations for improvement of the program were also made.

The question regarding advisement for the dissertation received some very positive results. One of the participants remarks, " I feel that I have received good direction in terms of what I need to do for my dissertation. I feel that I have had a lot of direction by inquiring." Another participant's response as to the selection of a topic for the dissertation stated that the advisor did not provide much assistance with the selection of the topic. The advice given was, "Do it on something you really care about, that you are willing to work on for a long period of time." Additional advice given was, "It will come to you."

Dissertation: Perceived Weaknesses

There was consensus among the group that there is much confusion during the early stages of the students' experience in the program. One response given by an advisor to a participant's question was: " Many of the questions you have about the program will be answered as you progress through the program."

Dissertation: Recommendations for Improvement

It was suggested that additional assistance and courses be provided to those students off-campus. It was also recommended that the dissertation seminar course be offered earlier in the students' programs in order to provide them with information needed for the rest of their course of studies.

EDL DOCTORAL PROGRAM EXPERIENCES MATRIX
Question #4

TOPIC	EXPERIENCES	SPECIFICS	PERCEIVED STRENGTHS	PERCEIVED WEAKNESSES	RECOMMENDA-TIONS
Dissertation	Process	Knowing the procedure	Advisers and faculty willing to assist High accessibility of faculty High accessibility to literature Library staff assistance	Insufficient advisement with dissertation topic and process Uncreative and primitive format Confusion Students need to constantly inquire about details Time frame inflexible 2 1/2 week courses cause difficulties	Provide additional off campus assistance Modernize format requirements to acknowledge and utilize computer typesetting capabilities Add pre-dissertation seminar course at beginning of program of studies to give students a head-start Teach additional courses off campus

Question 5: Narrative

Location: Perceived Strengths

Two of the six participants were on-campus students. They felt that they had good access to information, and the faculty were willing to assist with their needs.

Four of the six participants were considered off-campus students. Three of the four responded positively to the courses that were available off-campus. One of the Phoenix students stated, " I haven't had any problems at all with the course offerings in the valley. I was accepted into the program, I believe in 1991 and again in 1993. I should be finishing my course work this fall, and this is as a part-time student."

Location: Perceived Weaknesses

One of the on-campus students felt that there was a problem with the sequence of courses offered. The off-campus students expressed the same concerns as well as concerns that their program of studies had not been signed after being in the program for four years. It was also unclear how to meet the requirements as an off-campus student.

Location: Recommendations for Improvement

It was suggested that the sequenced of courses offered on-campus be clarified to a certain degree. Off-campus students recommended that additional faculty be provided to teach off-campus courses, and that clarification needs to be made concerning residency requirements.

EDL DOCTORAL PROGRAM EXPERIENCES MATRIX
Question #5

TOPIC	EXPERIENCES	SPECIFICS	PERCEIVED STRENGTHS	PERCEIVED WEAKNESSES	RECOMMENDA-TIONS
On campus	Course offering Access to Advisors Literature Access Residency Requirement	Sequence Advisement Quality& Quantity Many questions	Flexibility Faculty willing to assist Good access	Sequence difficulties	Clarify sequence
Off campus	Course offering Access to Advisors Literature Access Residency Requirement	Sequence Advisement Quality& Quantity Many Questions	Flexibility Faculty willing to assist Good access	Sequence difficulties Program of studies unsigned after 4 years Requirements unclear how to meet	Add faculty for off campus program Clarify how to meet residency requirements

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Summary

Rather than include a conventional summary of results and recommendations for future research, the study participants have decided to attempt a summary of this project from a phenomenological perspective. It seemed to the participants that the variety of backgrounds, ages, ethnic backgrounds and life experiences of the study group members might provide a stimulating body of insights into what was, empirically at least, a shared experience of qualitative research. Rather than present a group conclusion synthesized by an editor, each member of the study group was asked to prepare a short, subjective statement summarizing, if possible, the essence of their experience or experiences as a participant in the project.

The group anticipates a high degree of agreement and disagreement among participants. By sorting these points of agreement and disagreement (in light, of course, of their own internal coding systems) readers may infer for themselves whether or not the Flashpots had captured the essence of a qualitative research experience (represented by points of agreement) or if their essential personhoods, plus their multicultural, multiethnic backgrounds, caused the creation of experiential and remembered parallel realities (points of disagree-

ment). Shared essence is the foundation of reality in the phenomenological approach. To paraphrase Edmund Husserl (1913-1962), the founder of the phenomenological school, "We can only know what we experience by attending to perceptions and meanings that awaken our conscious awareness" (Patton, 1990).

Participant Y

During the earliest stages of the group's existence, I formed a strong impression that our project was doomed to be a typical administrators-in-summer school group project. This is to say, everything would be put off until the day before the due date and then hastily slopped together at the last minute by the two or three most anxious members of the group. Now, as we approach the end of our project, I am already looking back on it with a great deal of nostalgia, primarily because everyone has worked hard on individual and shared labor, no one has taken a free ride, and we have a reasonable prospect of coming in under the deadline.

Reviewing the tables, I am impressed, not by the amount of "bellyaching" (which is what I anticipated would be the essence of our focus group), but by how many positive points were discovered about the doctoral program and how many good suggestions for improvement the group was able to generate.

We have worked so well together, considering that we were strangers just three weeks ago, that I am really quite sorry to see our time together end so soon. Maybe somewhere in this sentiment is what is truly the good aspect of the doctoral program. Maybe this is also the good aspect of qualitative research. I have spent so many lonely hours huddled in front of computer screens, crunching numbers, that this way of exploring reality has been like the opening of a huge door to an exciting new place.

Participant W

The entire process of the focus group simulation was a very positive experience. The group as a whole worked very well together and each participant played a significant role in the success of the group. The group leader acted as a moderator, allowing leadership of each participant to come through. Specific tasks were assigned (voluntarily) so that each participant was able to focus on a particular area of the assignment and carry out that task.

The focus group was very interesting. I felt very comfortable during the entire process and didn't feel intimidated by anyone in the group. It was a very relaxed atmosphere and I felt that the questions were answered openly and honestly. We went in knowing that names would not be used in the report, and the participants appeared to feel comfortable with that.

I gained knowledge about qualitative research by participating in the focus group. Participating in such a group enabled me to put readings on qualitative research into perspective. This experience allowed me to investigate areas of the CEE doctoral program in Educational Leadership that may need improvement for future doctoral students. This experience will assist others and myself, in gaining knowledge about the program. It will also encourage us to be sensitive to the needs of future students applying for the program. With an understanding of the perceived strengths, weaknesses and recommendation, we will be able to take action to make the processes of the program easier for students.

This project also allowed me to gain knowledge and experience in qualitative research that will assist me in future research projects, including my dissertation. I feel comfortable with the idea of setting up focus groups for future research projects. As a focus group participant, I was able to see, as an insider, the process of the focus group, allowing me to be sensitive to those I may recruit into a focus group in the future.

Participant X

As participant "X", this research project was a valuable learning experience. This was my first opportunity to become involved in a focus group process. Research Design, is where I first heard about focus groups.

With an academic and experiential background in the social sciences, qualitative research utilizing focus groups made a lot of sense to me from the beginning. It seemed to get at the quality of the experiences that might be the subject of the research. The colleagues with whom I worked, helped make this experience a good one because each expressed an interest, and the tasks were easily divided up utilizing the various skills and interests of the group members. Due to my experience in interviewing, I volunteered to draft the questions for the Demographic Profile and the Focus Group Questions and Probes. Also, because of my secretarial skills, I volunteered to transcribe the audiotapes.

From this research project, I have learned that focus groups can be hard work in terms of developing the research questions, the focus group questions and probes that will illicit quality information, transcribing the audiotape, accurately coding the material, and generating the final report. However, I have also learned that the depth of information supports its own validity. Certainly in this case, there is no reason for participants to provide other than genuine information because it relates to personal experiences, information which only they could provide.

Participant R

The experience of participating in a group project to investigate the students' perceptions and experiences in the CEE doctoral program at NAU has

given me an invaluable experience in developing a problem statement and conducting a focus interview. Participating in the focus group as both interviewer and as interviewee has somewhat eased my anxiety of conducting the same for my dissertation. Many anxieties of the focus interview process, the coding process, and the development of matrices, have been eased considerably. I intend to use a focus group for my dissertation and the process seems to be much more clear than prior to participating in this project. Working with a group of professionals that composed our team was also invaluable. Each of the members participated and contributed equally. No one member of the team was asked to contribute more than their share.

The experience of actually developing the "Problem Statement," coding, and developing matrices for the two of the five questions used in the focus group, provided me with an experience that would not otherwise have been available to me prior to doing the "real thing" for my dissertation.

A group of professionals, such as our team, enabled us to conduct the focus interview in a professional manner. I hope that other doctoral students are fortunate enough to experience the process as I experienced it, and gain the invaluable knowledge that I did.

Participant Z

This project allowed me to participate in the creation of a focus group, set and define the delimitations of the study, adopt the role of interviewee and interviewer, code and analyze the data collected, and share the results with others.

The experience of being a member in the focus group was positive. Many of the issues that were discussed had personal meaning to me. Overall, the group process went smoothly. There were no apparent conflicts and all

members provided a good measure of input.

As a student who is preparing to write a dissertation by utilizing focus group methodology, this project was highly useful. In a certain manner, the projects combined Dewey's philosophy of learning by doing and Eisner's advise of becoming artistic critics of evaluation.

It would be interesting to do a follow-up study of recently enrolled CEE doctoral student to see if their perception of entry into the program was similar to those of our focus group. This follow-up study could help to verify the improvements that needed to be made in the admissions process. Hopefully, the data collected will be shared with the administrators of the NAU/CEE doctoral program since it represents the experiences of a wide cross-section of the population. It would heighten the value of this project to know that the data and results would be used to strengthen the CEE doctoral program rather than being just another project that we completed as part of our journey toward the Ed.D. degree.

Participant U

By participating in the study, I felt I had something of value to contribute to future doctoral students in Northern Arizona University's Educational Leadership program in CEE. Although I have not experienced any difficulty in the process of being accepted into the program, I have experienced being "lost" in the shuffle of students. As I progress in the program, however, I am beginning to feel more comfortable in knowing exactly what is the next step is in the dissertation path to the "Doctor" stage.

During the simulation focus group process, I felt the participants were genuine and had a sincere attitude toward the process. Since the participants were fairly new to the to the program, there was a camaraderie approach to

discussing and answering the questions that were asked.

From my perspective, the comprehensive exam was a major concern of all the participants since none of the participants had yet taken the exam(s). My concern was, why make it a mystery learning experience as opposed to a "mastery" learning experience, as Dr. G. would say. I felt that if all the students were informed of the contents of the exam, the students would be better prepared and probably produce better quality exams.

By participating in the study, I hope I have contributed something of worth and value to prospective students in the NAU/CEE Educational Leadership doctoral program.

Recommendations

Many recommendations for improvements were generated by this research project. It is the group's hope that these recommendation will be read and utilized to improve the NAU/CEE doctoral program in Educational Leadership.

1. Hold interviews at off-campus locations.
2. Provide a uniform packet of program requirements to all students and faculty.
3. Make the admissions process consistent.
4. Provide feedback to students at all points of the admission process.
5. Clarify the admission process of CEE and the Graduate College.
6. Provide adequate advisement and/or seminars on the admission process.
7. Increase the number of courses offered in qualitative research.
8. Increase the use of computer statistic programs in statistic courses.
9. Decrease the secretiveness about comprehensive exams by creating a step-by-step handbook on content and requirements.
10. Eliminate in-house/timed portions of comprehensive exams. Replace with take-home comprehensive exercises.
11. Create an up-to-date data-base on students' progress toward degree.
12. Provide additional off-campus assistance for dissertations.
13. Increase the number of courses offered at off-campus locations.
14. Add a pre-dissertation seminar at the beginning of the program.
15. Clarify sequence of courses needed for successful completion of the program.
16. Clarify how the residency requirements can be fulfilled.

Implications

Educational researchers have historically used personal interviews and questionnaires to collect research data. The focus group approach allows for in-depth discussion and probing to obtain those all-important divergent points of view. In this manner, meaningful insight into group members' perceptions about the topic can be gleaned (Krueger, 1988). This project confirmed the usefulness of focus group research methodology.

In regards to doctoral students' experiences in the CEE program in Educational Leadership, there is an imbricated barrier of communication between the students, faculty and administrators. This encompassing communication breakdown is found throughout all areas in this study; uniformity of course requirements, the admissions process, advisement policy, information regarding the comprehensive examinations, course sequencing, and residency requirements.

Since communication skills are one of the 12 areas that doctoral students are encouraged to become competent, it would seem wise to encourage better communication within the Educational Leadership program.

The Educational Leadership program's lack of communication to its doctoral students carries over into its approach to the education provided. In spite of the collaborative learning model espoused by the Center for Excellence in Education, many of the classes are still taught vis-a-vis traditional teacher centered models. Additionally, many classes are mislabelled as seminars when they have enrollments of more than fifty students. A lack of applied pedagogy is demonstrated in many classes as the students are treated like children rather than adults.

It is hoped that the results of this study will be used in a positive manner to improve the quality of the Educational Leadership program at NAU/CEE.

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